

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-11

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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
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INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
USINT BAGHDAD
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

S E C R E T DAMASCUS 3232

E.O. 11652: XGDS-1,4
TAGS: PEPR, SY, UR
SUBJECT: SYRIAN PERCEPTION OF SOVIET ACTIVITY IN AFRICA

1. SUMMARY: SYRIANS HAD NOT PAID MUCH ATTENTION TO SOVIET ACTIVITY IN AFRICA UNTIL THE CUBAN INTERVENTION IN ETHIOPIA FORCED THEM TO CONSIDER THE IMPLICATIONS FOR SYRIA. NOW THEY FEAR THAT SOVIET SUCCESSES MAY EMBOLDEN THE USSR TO DEMAND MORE IN TERMS OF A POLITICAL PAYOFF FOR SOVIET SUPPORT. ASSAD MAY ALSO BE CONCERNED THAT APPARENT US WEAKNESS IN DEFENSE OF WESTERN INTEREST STRENGTHENS THE ARGUMENTS OF THOSE WHO OPPOSE HIS OPENING TO THE WEST. BURDENED WITH DOUBTS ABOUT US POLITICAL WILL, ASSAD MAY FIND IT DIFFICULT TO THROW HIS LOT IN WITH ANY US PEACE INITIATIVE IN THE ABSENCE OF A CLEAR IDEA OF WHAT HE STANDS TO GAIN.
END SUMMARY.

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2. THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT HAS TENDED TO GIVE LITTLE THOUGHT TO SOVIET AND CUBAN ACTIVITIES IN BLACK AFRICA WHICH APPEAR REMOTE FROM SYRIA'S ALL-CONSUMING AND EGOCENTRIC CONCERN WITH THE MIDDLE EAST. IT WAS AND STILL IS GENERALLY CONVENIENT FOR THE SYRIAN LEADERSHIP TO SUPPORT SOVIET BACKED LIBERATION MOVEMENTS SINCE THIS HELPS KEEP HOME-GROWN LEFTIST

IDEOLOGUES QUIET AND STRENGTHENS RELATIONS WITH THE SOVIETS AND THEIR ALLIES ON WHOM SYRIA DEPENDS FOR MILITARY AND DEVELOPMENTAL ASSISTANCE.

3. SYRIAN POLICYMAKERS APPEAR TO BE UNDER NO ILLUSION THAT THE SOVIETS ARE OPERATING FROM ALTRUISTIC MOTIVES, BUT THE SYRIAN EXPERIENCE OF BEING ABLE TO KEEP THE SOVIET UNION AT ARM'S LENGTH WHILE MAINTAINING A GENERALLY PRODUCTIVE RELATIONSHIP HAD LULLED THEM INTO THE COMPLACENCY BELIEF THAT A STRING OF SOVIET FOREIGN POLICY SUCCESSES IN THE THIRD WORLD HAD NO DIRECT BEARING ON SOVIET-SYRIAN RELATIONS. THAT COMPLACENCY HAS BEEN SHAKEN BY SOVIET SPONSORED ACTIVITIES IN ETHIOPIA.

4. WE ARE TOLD BY MFA OFFICIALS THAT WHEN PRESIDENT AL-ASSAD WENT TO MOSCOW IN FEBRUARY HE WAS PRESSED TO SIGN A BLANK-CHECK COMMUNIQUE STATEMENT SUPPORTING SOVIET ACTIVITIES IN THE HORN. ASSAD THREATENED TO MAKE HIS DISSATISFACTION WITH SOVIET POLICY IN THE HORN PUBLIC AND THE RESULTING COMMUNIQUE LANGUAGE REPRESENTED A COMPROMISE. ASSAD PRIVATELY MADE IT CLEAR THAT WHILE HE WOULD NOT SUPPORT SOMALI ACTIVITIES IN THE OGADEN, HE WOULD CONTINUE TO FULLY BACK THE ERITREAN CAUSE, MATERIALLY AND POLITICALLY. THIS MESSAGE WAS CONVEYED TO THE CUBANS AS WELL, WHO APPARENTLY PLEDGED TO STAY OUT OF ERITREAN CONFLICT. IN FACT, THE SYRIANS NOW BELIEVE THE CUBANS ARE RENEGING ON THEIR PROMISE.

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5. THE ISSUE AT STAKE FOR THE SYRIANS IS NOT SO MUCH THEIR POLICY TOWARD ERITREA AS THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SOVIET UNION. IN THE MFA, AT LEAST, OFFICIALS ARE BEGINNING TO WORRY THAT SOVIET SUCCESSES IN AFRICA AND ELSEWHERE, AS IN AFGHANISTAN, MIGHT STRENGTHEN THE HAND OF THOSE IN THE KREMLIN WHO BELIEVE THAT SOVIET MILITARY, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL SUPPORT MUST BE PAID FOR BY CLIENT REGIMES IN TERMS OF POLITICAL INDEPENDENCE. THIS IS A PRICE ASSAD IS NOT PREPARED TO PAY AS HE IS CURRENTLY DEMONSTRATING BY STEPPING UP DELIVERIES OF SOVIET MANUFACTURED ARMS TO THE ERITREANS.

6. MEANWHILE, THE SYRIANS ARE GOING ABOUT BUSINESS AS USUAL HOLDING ECONOMIC DISCUSSIONS WITH THE CUBANS AND NORMAL EXCHANGES WITH THE SOVIETS IN HOPES AND EXPECTATION THAT THE SOVIETS WILL NOT WANT A PUBLIC CONFRONTATION. AS ONE SYRIAN PUT IT, THE SYRIAN REGIME IS TRYING TO LIE LOW WHILE THE IRAQIS TAKE THE LEAD IN ASSERTING THEIR RIGHTS AND REESTABLISHING THE POLITICAL BALANCE WITH THE SOVIETS. THE SYRIANS FEEL THEY ARE ALREADY PAYING A PRICE IN DELAYED DELIVERIES OF MILITARY AND DEVELOPMENTAL EQUIPMENT, BUT THEY

ARE PREPARED TO IGNORE THIS SITUATION JUST AS THEY DID WHEN SYRIA WENT INTO LEBANON ANTICIPATING THAT THE SOVIETS, IN THE END, WILL GIVE IN TO PROTECT THEIR LIMITED ASSETS AND ACCESS IN THE AREA.

7. AN ATTENDENT PROBLEM OF CURRENT SOVIET ACTIVITY FOR PRESIDENT AL-ASSAD ARISES BECAUSE OF HIS POLICY OF IMPROVING RELATIONS WITH THE WEST AND, PARTICULARLY, WITH THE US. THE JUSTIFICATION FOR THIS POLICY HAS BEEN THAT THE ARAB CAUSE WILL REQUIRE US AND WESTERN SUPPORT IF ISRAEL IS TO BE FORCED INTO CONCESSIONS BY OTHER THAN MILITARY MEANS. ASSAD'S CRITICS CONTEND THAT THE US DOES NOT HAVE THE POLITICAL WILL TO IMPOSE ITS VIEWS ON ANYONE, EVEN WHEN ITS OWN INTERESTS ARE AT STAKE. AS ONE AIR
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FORCE GENERAL ASKED US, WHY SHOULD PRESIDENT AL-ASSAD PUT ANY RELIANCE IN THE US WHEN IT IS CLEAR THAT THE US CANNOT PROTECT ITS OWN INTERESTS ELSEWHERE IN THE WORLD LET ALONE IN THE MIDDLE EAST. ASSAD HAS BEEN ABLE TO POINT TO THE US PERFORMANCE IN LEBANON AS PARTIAL JUSTIFICATION FOR HIS POLICY AND THE PACKAGE DEAL ON AIRCRAFT WAS SEEN AS A STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION. NEVERTHELESS, THERE ARE STILL A NUMBER OF SYRIANS WHO DOUBT THE WISDOM OF ASSAD'S OPENING TO THE WEST. WE HAVE MORE THAN ONCE HEARD THE APPEAL: "PLEASE GIVE ASSAD SOME AMMUNITION TO JUSTIFY HIS POLICY."

8. ASSAD HAS GIVEN NO INDICATION THAT HE INTENDS TO CHANGE HIS APPROACH TO THE MIDDLE EAST PROBLEM. HE CAN STILL HANDLE INTERNAL CRITICS. NEVERTHELESS, A COMBINATION OF STABILIZATION OF LEBANON'S PROBLEM, INCREASED SOVIET PRESSURE FOR SYRIAN SUPPORT, AND CONTINUED SYRIAN PERCEPTION OF US POLITICAL WEAKNESS MIGHT FORCE HIM TO RECONSIDER. AT A MINIMUM, ASSAD TODAY IS NOT LIKELY TO TAKE US ASSURANCES IN LIEU OF ACTION AS A RELIABLE BASIS FOR HIS POLICY. HE WILL CONTINUE TO DEMAND A PERFORMANCE BOND, BEFORE HE TIES HIMSELF INTO ANY US LED INITIATIVE.
PELLETREAU

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